

With ears lowered, Tori watched with apprehension as Captain Gutassi entered the conference room. He closed the door behind himself, but didn't sit. Instead, he rested his palms on the table and loomed over the rusty red geroo.

Tori swallowed hard, and her heart raced. For the most part, she'd been playing things cool and calm as if nothing bothered her, but the situation had turned dire. If the commissioner truly was going to purge the ship, then Druka would die. She didn't care overly for her own life, but his? He deserved better than this. He would have waited for her to return, but her neediness will have dragged him to his doom.

"Well?"

Tori hid her paws beneath the table. "Well, I think we've done really well, considering," she said without much confidence in her voice. "My investigations have turned up some good leads, and everyone on the security crew has been working their tails off reducing the list of suspects—"

"How many are left on the list?" demanded Gutassi.

"Uh, well, we've managed to remove most of the crew from the list—"

"How many is most?" The captain's ears were low and frustrated with Tori's elusiveness.

"Nearly ... sixty percent?" she whispered.

At that, Gutassi put his paws to his face and sank slowly into a chair. "Sixty... There's still four *thousand* geroo on the suspect list?"

"Uh... Thereabouts."

In an instant, he exploded like a supernova. "How can you expect me to execute four thousand geroo?" he shouted.

"Me?" Tori squealed. Feeling defensive for only a moment, her anger flared hot. She screamed back, "I never told you to execute *anyone!* It was *your* stupid idea to murder everyone we couldn't eliminate. I told you that a week wasn't long enough—"

"Okay, okay," said Gutassi with his palms raised in surrender, trembling slightly but still far more calm than he had been a moment ago. "Okay, it's fine. This was just a backup plan anyhow, just in case you were correct about the commissioner's intentions."

Tori sat back in her seat, shaking and sucking in desperate calming breath. "So, what do we do?"

"We need a backup plan for our backup plan, that's all."

He peeled the strand from his shoulder and set it on the table face-up. With a few taps, it started to ring. Security Chief Tipohee answered quickly, but his voice was the most tired that Tori had heard. "Hey, Captain," he said, "we're not gonna make it. There just isn't time."

“Yeah, I see that,” agreed Gutassi. “Got a new plan, new task for you.”

“Glad to hear it,” said the chief. “Call off the hunt? The guys need some rest.”

“Negative. Keep them working,” said the captain. “This task is just for you. I want the rest of the security crew working up until the last possible moment. We might get lucky, and they’ll turn something up.”

“Damn. Okay, what do you need?”

“I want you to put together a list of troublemakers.”

“Troublemakers?” repeated back Security Chief Tipohee.

“Yeah,” said Gutassi. “Everyone with a record. Thieves, suspected thieves, drug dealers, drug addicts, black marketeers. I want those who start fist fights, those who beat up their mates or slap around their cubs.”

“Captain?” Tori hissed low. These weren’t necessarily suspects! Did the captain really just want fodder he could toss to the company? Crew members he’d miss least if they got executed?

“Juvenile delinquents too?” asked the chief.

Gutassi bit his lip. “Maybe the older ones, if they’re real trouble. No one under sixteen, okay?”

A pause on the call. “Corrupt officers?”

The captain looked Tori in the eyes for a long moment before his gaze lowered slowly back to his strand. “Uh... I suppose—if you’re *certain* there’s merit to any allegations against them, at least.”

“I can do that.”

Gutassi tapped his fingers nervously. “How many is that, do you suppose?”

“How many do you need?” asked Tipohee. “You tell me a small number, I’ll pick out the worst of the worst. You need a lot, and I’ll put everyone on the list.”

The captain steepled his fingers. “About ... seventy-five?”

“Seventy-five?” Tori gasped. He was going to execute seventy-five crewmen just to hide the fact that they didn’t know who the murderer was?

Gutassi silenced her with a glare.

“Yeah, I can do that,” said the chief. “You *certain* that’s what you want me to do?”

Tipohee had worked this out on his own, Tori could tell. He understood that everyone on the list would be a sacrifice.

"Yeah, do it," said the captain. "Get me the list before the commissioner arrives."

"Yes, sir."

He broke the connection and the two stared at one another.

"This is a terrible idea," said Tori. "Not only is it the most unethical thing I've ever heard of, there's almost no chance that the murderer will actually be one of these troublemakers you're throwing into the recycler."

He scratched at his scruff. "Yeah, I realize that," he admitted. "It just buys us some time to find the right guy. And if I've *got to* sacrifice someone to get there, it might as well be those I can easily live without."

Tori rested her elbows on the table and interlaced her fingers. She pressed her chin against her thumbs. "And after you've assured the commissioner that the killer is someone on this list, but then he continues to take victims? What then?"

"I'll cover it up," he said without blinking. "No other choice. Same with executing the right guy when we find him. We'll just say he did something else."

Tori frowned, and her stomach ached. She didn't want to have anything to do with this! She was just supposed to find a killer, not help kill innocent people. "You wanted the guy who was making the videos too," she reminded him. "You gonna claim he's on this list as well?"

"I'll have to."

"And if more episodes of *Boots* come out?"

"They won't," he assured her. "I'll declare martial law. Tell everyone to delete every copy of it and make it a capital crime for possessing it or making more."

She stared at him, not sure she heard correctly. "Y-you're gonna—"

"Execute every last one of them if I have to," he said standing. "The time for humoring this sort of treachery has passed."